

El Paso Times - June 28, 2010

Diana Washington Valdez

EL PASO -- Soldiers who suffer from traumatic brain injury deserve to receive the best care possible from the military they serve, U.S. Rep. Harry Teague, D-New Mexico, said.

To that end, Teague said he met Sunday with Fort Bliss and Beaumont Army Medical Center officials to discuss some of the concerns voiced by soldiers with traumatic brain injury (TBI).

After that, Teague, who serves on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, talked to soldiers and health care professionals at the Mentis Neuro Rehabilitation facility in Central El Paso, which treats TBI patients.

"Fort Bliss officials assured us that they are very concerned and want to give soldiers the best care in the world," Teague said. "I am going to continue to ask questions, and get back to Beaumont Army Medical Center to make sure we are all pushing in the right direction for the men and women who are defending our country."

The military estimates that 150,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan developed TBI, mainly from explosions -- vehicle bombs, land mines and heavy bombing -- and from other causes.

Several Army soldiers who were diagnosed with TBI and are receiving treatment at Mentis said they are fortunate. Many of their fellow soldiers have not been referred to a TBI specialist, while others are reluctant to seek help because they fear it will end their military careers.

"I was in five different explosions in Iraq, and I did three tours there," said Sgt. 1st Class William Fraas, 38. "I was part of a Military Transition Team, which was sent to train Iraqi soldiers on how to run their own country. I received concussions from the explosions. I was also diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder."

His wife, Marie Fraas, was the first to notice his TBI symptoms -- trouble concentrating, short-term memory loss, inability to do more than one thing at a time, and difficulty in dealing with noisy environments.

Fraas, who has 18½ years in the service, said his wife finally took away his car keys after he ran red lights and drove the wrong way on one-way streets.

"At Mentis, they understand my husband's injury. In the military, they tended to blow it off," Marie Fraas said.

Staff Sgt. Victor Medina and Sgt. Brandon Sanford also were present at Mentis for the meeting with Teague.

"We have brain injuries, but we are not stupid," said Medina, who developed stuttering as a result of TBI. "All of us here, will still have a lot to offer."

Roxana Delgado, Medina's wife, said it is important for the soldiers to have consistency and continuity in their treatment.

The soldiers' relatives also said families must be a part of the rehabilitation process. Some adjustments may involve reducing noise and bright lights.

Three of the soldiers who were at Mentis on Sunday said they wore dark sunglasses indoors because they had become ultra sensitive to lights.

Sanford, who trained dogs for the Army, held his Labrador service dog, Harley, on a leash. He said he had seizures after returning from the war.

"I would like to see my treatment continue, so I can get well enough to return to my wife and 10-year-old son in San Diego," Sanford said.

Sgt. Raymond Hisey said he had several frustrating experiences while trying to seek treatment at Fort Bliss.

"I had two deployments to Iraq. I also took a fall and hit my head while there," Hisey said. "When I returned, I started having memory problems and trouble interacting with my family."

His son Isaac Hisey, 15, said, "I needed to remind him of a lot of things. He also gets stressed out very easily."

Raymond Hisey said he nearly gave up after having different speech and occupational therapists at Fort Bliss cancel appointments on him. Because of his symptoms, he said, he felt too overwhelmed to try to push further for medical attention.

"We want someone to fight for us," Hisey said at the session with Teague.

Soldiers' relatives said they liked Mentis because it offered the different therapies for their spouses under one roof. It also allowed the speech, physical and occupational therapists to compare notes and check on the progress of their patients.

Dr. Kevin Sandberg, a physical medicine specialist and physiatrist, said it's hard at this stage to tell how many soldiers and veterans in the El Paso region have TBI. Many of them probably have not been screened for it.

He said some of the TBI symptoms include dizziness, loss of balance, losing one's temper easily, and unusual spending sprees.

"A lot of these guys appear normal," Sandberg said. "TBI is not psychiatric. It is a different type of mental issue, which is treatable. We also train the families. Instead of giving them medications, some soldiers instead might require calming the environment."

Hisey agreed. "For example, when I get home and the kids rush up because they are all excited to see me, I get overwhelmed," he said.

Fort Bliss officials were unavailable Sunday for comment about Teague's visit. However, earlier this month, Maj. Gen. Howard Bromberg, the post commander, explained the status and role of the installation's new TBI facility next to its warrior transition barracks.

He said the facility, which is supposed to open soon, is intended for screening and not for treatment as some media had reported.

The facility will help the military to screen National Guard members and reservists returning from the war, so they can be sent home as soon as they are done with the process.

Bromberg said everyone who gets a concussion receives a Military Acute Concussion Evaluation while in the area where the war is fought, and they're also screened again when they return to Fort Bliss.

Soldiers said such documentation will help them qualify for treatment should the need arise.

Teague said he recently learned from Col. James Baunchalk, the commander of Beaumont Army Medical Center, that the Defense Department has designated the military hospital as a level 2 facility for TBI.

This means Fort Bliss only manages care for mild and moderate TBI cases. More severe cases are referred to other programs.

Teague said military officials told him the hospital's main challenge for TBI is recruiting and retaining qualified medical professionals.

Diana Washington Valdez may be reached at dvaldez@elpasotimes.com; 546-6140.

Staff writer Chris Roberts contributed to this story.